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ABSTRACT

A model of field instruction for bachelor of social work (BSW) students was studied. Objectives were: to examine selected agency indicators of practica satisfaction, determine the extent of integration between field practica and other social work courses, ascertain the contribution of the social work curriculum in preparing students for their first social work position, and determine the role of field practica satisfaction as it relates to retention of BSW students and recent graduates. The study sample consisted of 86 juniors and seniors majoring in social work and 101 BSW graduates for the years 1977 to 1980 from one social work program. The majority of respondents were white, female, Kentucky residents, and 22 years old at time of graduation. The questionnaire focused on: career choices, program satisfaction, extent of satisfaction with social work course preparation for work, demographic and academic information, and practica experiences including level of responsibility of agency assignments, significance of agency assignments, satisfaction with placement for learning needs, frequency of supervisory conferences, and extent of effective integration of practica with other social work courses. The model of field instruction utilized the organizing framework of teaching-learning centers. (SW)

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# FIELD PRACTICA: AN APPRAISAL OF ONE BSW PROGRAM*

by

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FIELD PRACTICA: AN APPRAISAL OF ONE BSW PROGRAM

## Purpose of Study

Field practice is an integral component of social work education. Students are eager, though often apprehensive, to begin field instruction and, thereby, social work practice. It is the first opportunity for many to apply classroom knowledge to the 'real' world of practice. They often consider their practica experiences to be the most important and meaningful experience of their education. It is a critical period in the emergence of a professional identity.

Students' perception of their field practicum experiences may be an invaluable aid in assessing a program's field instruction model and objectives. Thus, the purposes of this study were to (1) present a model of field instruction and assess selected goals of the model, (2) examine selected agency indicators of practica satisfaction, (3) determine the extent of integration between field practica and other social work courses, (4) ascertain the contribution of the social work curriculum, as reflected by required social work courses, in preparing students for their first social work position, and (5) ascertain the role of field practica satisfaction as it relates to retention of BSW students and recent graduates.

## Study Sample and Data Collection Method

The study sample consisted of 107 juniors and seniors majoring in social work and 177 BSW graduates for the years 1977 to 1980 from one social work program. During the spring semester 1980, all 107 upper level undergraduate students were given a questionnaire to complete. A total of 86 questionnaires were returned for an 80 percent return rate.

A modified version of the study questionnaire was then mailed to each BSW graduate from 1977 to 1980 to provide comparative data with the current student sample. Two follow-up mailings were conducted approximately one month apart. A total of 101 questionnaires were returned for a 57 percent response rate.

Study Instruments

The 13 page questionnaires, designed from prior research, included questions about (1) career choices upon graduation, (2) program satisfaction, (3) extent of satisfaction with social work course preparation, including practica, for their first social work position, (4) demographic and academic information, (5) and practica experiences including level of responsibility of agency assignments, significance of agency assignments, satisfaction with placement for learning needs, frequency of supervisory conferences, and extent of effective integration of practica with other social work courses. This latter section was based in part on the work of Rothman and Jones[1].

Description of Field Practicum Instruction Model

The College of Social Work at the University of Kentucky offers practicum instruction through seven Teaching-Learning-Centers (TLC's). Each Center is made up "of a constellation of agencies related to a societal task or population. The word center refers not to a building or to a specific location but rather to a concept which provides for an integration of multiple learning experiences within the framework of broadly-grouped agency systems and services."[2] The Centers, originally developed in 1970 for the graduate program, were first used with undergraduate students in 1974. Undergraduate students have utilized primarily the Community and Urban Affairs, Criminal and Juvenile Justice, Family and Children, Health Systems I (Mental Health) and Health Systems II (Medical) Teaching-Learning-Centers.

Each TLC is directed by full-time, tenure-track faculty who coordinate each field practicum unit to meet the needs of a diverse social work professional community and to allow for specialization within a generalist framework. Each TLC consists of four educational components: agency assignments, weekly student seminars, individual conferences with students, and related learning activities. Undergraduate students complete two practica for 16 credit hours which includes 720 hours in agencies, usually in their senior year, and are generally expected to choose two different TLCs.

TLC Directors are typically responsible for 12 graduate and eight undergraduate students. Teaching assistants, assigned to each Center, assist the Director in further individualizing the educational process for undergraduate students. Teaching assistants, most of whom are second year graduate students with a special interest in social work education, are carefully chosen, receive a nominal stipend, and complete a number of courses in social work education. TA's meet with undergraduate practicum students at least every other week, read weekly logs, participate in and provide leadership at seminars, and are involved in agency midterm and final conferences with the Director.

The college utilizes common syllabi for all TLCs in order to maximize the realization of common objectives for all students. Syllabi addendum have also been developed for each Center and address the knowledge and skills specific to the practice focus of the particular TLC. The first practicum is often observational and descriptive with emphasis on basic knowledge and skills relating to the community and its resources, the agency within the community social service structure and appropriate tasks in the agency consistent with student readiness. The second practicum emphasizes analytical learning and advanced practice opportunities.

A major goal of this curriculum is to prepare undergraduate students as generalist social workers. Assignment to the Centers is intended to provide students with appropriate learning opportunities and experiences which will enable students to perform competently in entry level positions upon graduation. Students' assessments then should not result in differential response in relation to assignment to different Centers nor by first or second placements for the study variables: level of responsibility in agency, integration of practicum with other social work courses, significance of agency assignments, satisfaction of agency placements for learning needs, and frequency of supervisory conferences. Chi-square analyses were utilized to test for differences among the four Centers for both first and second placements for each study variable. No significant differences were found. Assignment to the different Centers then did not result in respondents reporting different experiences or different levels of satisfaction. Further analyses were conducted without regard to TLC assignment of students.

Study Sample

The majority of respondents were white, female, state residents and 22 years of age at time of graduation. Approximately half of the graduates were single and 44 percent were married; whereas, for current students 74 percent were single. The demographic characteristics of the 187 subjects were, therefore, fairly homogeneous between current students and graduates except for age appropriate differences and marital status changes. National demographic data on baccalaureate students in social work indicate that the study sample is comparable, though the percentage of minorities is less than found in the current BSW student population.[3] As a result of these demographic findings, the study results may have limited generalizability to some other undergraduate social work programs.

Student Appraisal of Agency Placement

This section addresses student perceptions of their (1) level of responsibility in the agency, (2) significance of agency assignments, (3) satisfaction for learning needs, and (4) frequency of supervisory sessions.

The first question asked: "What was your level of responsibility in your practicum agency that most clearly described your usual situation?" Four responses were possible: (1) "specific tasks assigned in detail and monitored closely," (2) "specific tasks described and agreed upon, but I work[ed] pretty much on my own," (3) "within broad policy outlines, I plan[ned] and carr[ied] out my own assignments, and (4) "I [was] completely free and [had] little or no limitations.[4] The findings are presented in Table 1.

Table 1. Level of Responsibility by Placement for Current Students and Graduates

| Level of Responsibility | First Placement (N = 147) % | Second Placement (N = 133) % | Totals (N = 280) % |
|---|---|---|---|
| Assigned in detail and monitored closely | 18 | 17 | 18 |
| Tasks described but worked on own | 56 | 49 | 53 |
| Planned and carried out own assignment | 19 | 25 | 22 |
| Free with little or no limitations | 7 | 9 | 8 |
| Totals | 100% | 100% | 101%* |

* Rounding error

Most students (53%) worked on their own after specific tasks were described by the agency instructor and agreed upon. Twenty-two percent planned and carried out their own assignments within broad policy outlines. Few students (8%) were completely free with little or no limitations. Level of responsibility increased between first and second placements, suggesting that students were given greater freedom and more responsibility to carry out assignments.

The second question asked subjects to indicate the significance of their agency assignments. Four responses were possible: (1) "Extremely important to me and to the [clients] with [whom] I work[ed]", (2) "Very important to me in terms of my own interest and growth, but not too significant in its overall impact," (3) Not very interesting to me or significant to my training, but very necessary (or important) for the agency and its clientele," and (4) "Most of my assignments were 'busy work', not very useful to me or to anyone"[5]. Table 2 presents findings of significance of agency assignment by placement for study subjects.

Table 2. Significance of Agency Assignments by Placement for Current Students and Graduates

| Significance of Agency Assignment | First Placement (N = 147) % | Second Placement (N = 133) % | Totals (N = 280) % |
|---|---|---|---|
| Important to student and clients | 46 | 60 | 53 |
| Important to student but not significant in overall impact | 39 | 22 | 31 |
| Not important to student but imp't for agency and clientele | 7 | 8 | 7 |
| Not useful to student, agency or clients | 8 | 10 | 9 |
| Totals | 100% | 100% | 100% |

Most students thought their agency assignments were for their growth and development (84%). Many believed that their assignments were important to the clients with whom they worked (53%) and this was especially evident for students in the second placement (60%). Only two students reported that both placements were not interesting or significant or useful (responses 3 and 4).

The third question asked students to indicate if agency placements had been satisfactory for their learning needs.[6] The findings are reported in Table 3. Most students thought their placements were satisfactory or very satisfactory for their learning needs (75%). There was also a marked increase in level of satisfaction from first to second placements for those reporting very satisfied. Only seven students indicated that both placements were so-so or unsatisfactory.

Table 3. Agency Placement Satisfaction for Current Students and Graduates

| Level of Satisfaction | First Placement (N = 147) % | Second Placement (N = 133) % | Totals (N = 280) % |
|---|---|---|---|
| Very Satisfactory | 42 | 58 | 49 |
| Satisfactory | 30 | 23 | 26 |
| So-So | 18 | 11 | 15 |
| Unsatisfactory | 6 | 4 | 5 |
| Very Unsatisfactory | 4 | 4 | 4 |
| Totals | 100% | 100% | 99%* |

* Rounding error.

When significance of agency assignments was compared to satisfaction for learning needs for first and second field practica, there was a very high correlation between them for all subjects. First practicum (gamma = .85) and second practicum (gamma = .92) indicated that significance of agency assignments correlated positively with satisfaction as reported by respondents (Table 4). Level of responsibility was not significantly related to significance of agency assignments or level of satisfaction for learning needs.

Table 4. Relationship Between Significance of Agency Assignment and Satisfaction for Learning Needs

| Significance of Agency Assignment | Satisfaction for Learning Needs | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| | First Placement | | Second Placement | |
| | Satisfied (N=105) | Not Satisfied (N=42) | Satisfied (N=106) | Not Satisfied (N=27) |
| Important to student and clients | 63 | 4 | 78 | 2 |
| Important to student but not significant in overall impact | 38 | 20 | 26 | 3 |
| Not imp't to student but imp't for agency and clientele | 4 | 6 | 3 | 8 |
| Not useful to student, agency or clients | 0 | 12 | 0 | 13 |
| | ($X^2$ = 56.6, p .00001) | | ($X^2$ = 85.8, p .00001) | |

Frequency of supervisory conferences with agency field instructors[7] is presented in Table 5. The findings show considerable variation. While few students (2%) never had a supervisory conference, this was an unexpected and disturbing finding. Many students (33%) also only had one conference each month and this was especially evident for first placements (41%). The most frequent number of supervisory conferences during the second placement was once a week (32%). Frequency of conferences was not related to satisfaction for learning needs.

Table 5. Frequency of Supervisory Conferences

| Frequency of Conferences | First Placement (N = 147) % | Second Placement (N = 133) % | Totals (N = 280) % |
|---|---|---|---|
| Never | 2 | 2 | 2 |
| Once a month | 41 | 23 | 33 |
| Every two weeks | 24 | 30 | 26 |
| Once a week | 23 | 32 | 27 |
| Each day in agency | 10 | 14 | 12 |
| Totals | 100% | 101%* | 100% |

* Rounding error

Integration Between Practica and Social Work Courses

Anaother question addressed the relationship between the field practicum and the social work program. Specifically, subjects were asked: "In your opinion, what was the extent of effective integration of your practicum (agency, seminars, conferences, related learning activities) with other social work courses?" Four responses were possible for each practicum: (1) Every effort was made to integrate other social work course knowledge into practicum and it was reinforced very well; (2) Some efforts were made to integrate other social work course knowledge, but without too much success; (3) No consistent effort appeared to be made to integrate other social work course knowledge, but there was no serious conflict; and (4) practicum and other social work course knowledge were often contradictory with resulting confusion and conflict.[8]

Table 6. Integration of Practicum with Other Social Work Courses for Current Students and Graduates

| Extent of Integration | First Placement (N = 148) % | Second Placement (N = 133) % | Totals (N = 281) % |
|---|---|---|---|
| Every effort | 43 | 48 | 46 |
| Some effort | 37 | 32 | 35 |
| No consistent effort | 16 | 17 | 16 |
| Class & field contradictory | 4 | 4 | 4 |
| Total | 100% | 101%* | 101%* |

* Rounding errors.

As Table 6 indicates, almost half (48%) believed that the field practicum had successfully integrated other social work course knowledge. However, 35 percent thought that some efforts were made but without too much success, and 16 percent noted that no consistent efforts were made. Further analyses showed that of the 133 students who had completed both practica, 62 percent indicated that, at least for one practicum, successful integration occurred between field and course knowledge. Only 11 students (8%) indicated that for both practica no consistent effort was made, or that class and field were contradictory. Nevertheless, these findings emphasize the need for all phases of practica to be clearly focused on integrating knowledge derived from prior and current social work courses.

Social Work Curriculum

The social work curriculum, as reflected by the required social work courses, was examined to determine course contribution to preparing students for their first social work position. Students rated each course on a scale

from (0) none to (4) greatly regarding extent of course preparation for first social work position (see Table 7).

Table 7. Extent of Preparation for First Social Work Position by Required Social Work Courses

| Required Course | BSW Graduates N | X | RANK | Current Students N | X | RANK |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Educational Practicum II | 99 | 3.53 | 1 | 40 | 3.48 | 2 |
| HB & SE | 93 | 3.22 | 2 | 71 | 3.58 | 1 |
| Educational Practicum I | 99 | 3.16 | 3 | 54 | 3.44 | 3 |
| Interventive Methods in Social Work | 95 | 2.71 | 5 | 73 | 2.33 | 8 |
| Social Work Research | 97 | 2.34 | 6 | 47 | 2.94 | 5 |
| The Social Work Profession and Social Welfare (for transfers of junior rank) | 23 | 2.22 | 7 | 22 | 2.55 | 6 |
| Introduction to Social Services | 80 | 2.03 | 8 | 72 | 2.47 | 7 |
| Senior Seminar | 98 | 1.95 | 9 | 35 | 2.06 | 11 |
| Social Welfare Policy | 97 | 1.87 | 10 | 60 | 2.20 | 10 |
| Development of Social Welfare | 82 | 1.71 | 11 | 70 | 2.27 | 9 |

The educational practicum courses, not surprisingly, contributed extensively to preparing students for their first social work position. While the course "Perspectives on Human Behavior and the Social Environment" was anticipated to be important to professional development, it was not expected to rank first for current students and second for BSW graduates. A tentative analysis suggests that this course provides information highly relevant to practice.

With few exceptions, the ranking of social work courses is directly related to students' perception of practice relevance. While ideally all required social work courses should contribute to the development of practice competency, students rated certain courses so low that it is incumbent on faculty to review these courses to determine if they are effectively contributing to students' development and are meeting curriculum objectives.

Practica Satisfaction and Retention in Social Work

The fifth objective of this study was to ascertain the relationship between selected variables related to field practica satisfaction and retention in social work. Both study samples were divided into career choice categories of 1) social work practice, 2) graduate education in social work, and 3) out of social work, in response to the query: "What are your plans immediately upon graduation?" (for current students) or "What did you do upon graduation?" (for BSW graduates).

Most current students planned to practice social work upon graduation (51%), 19 percent planned to attend graduate school in social work, while a surprising 27 percent planned to leave the profession immediately upon graduation. For the graduate sample, 42 percent actually entered social work practice upon graduation, 20 percent attended graduate school in social work, and 39 percent left the field of social work. The primary reason given for leaving the field of social work by this sample was the inability to find a social work job (74%).

Separate and combined chi-square analyses were conducted for both current students and graduates by career status on each of the previously described field practica satisfaction variables. No significant differences were found for any of the variables for either study sample separately or when combined. It would appear, from the responses of this study sample, that self-reported perceptions of field practica satisfaction have little, if any, relationship to retention in social work.

Discussion

A model of field instruction was briefly presented. This model, utilizing the organizing framework of teaching-learning-centers, has provided unique learning experiences since 1970 for graduate students and since 1974 for undergraduate students. The opportunity to complete two practica has enriched students immeasurably. They have continued to develop their knowledge and understanding of selected social problems and populations-at-risk. Service delivery systems have been critically examined and related to policy formulation and development and to actual service programs for individuals, families, groups, and communities. Students gain valuable social work practice experience as they develop and refine appropriate skills, utilize the problem-solving process, examine their values and attitudes, become familiar with and utilize community resources, and perform a variety of roles, such as broker, advocate, outreach worker, and caregiver.

Assignment to two different agencies in two different teaching-learning-centers affords students the opportunity to generalize the viability of their social work practice knowledge and application to all settings with appropriate modifications for a particular setting. Seminars are a major forum for the dynamic interplay and exchange of ideas, beliefs, feelings, and attitudes as students share and examine policy, programs, and services within the context of a voluntary and public social welfare delivery system operating at the city, county, state, and national levels of government.

The model, as briefly described, is viable and is adaptable to the future needs and directions of the social work profession and the College of Social Work. The rationale, conceptualization, and development of the model has been presented elsewhere.[9]

The second objective examined selected agency and program indicators of practica satisfaction. Significance of agency assignment was found to be positively correlated with satisfaction for learning needs. Most students reported satisfaction with their agency placements. Those students, however, who believed their placements were not useful to themselves, the agency, or clients, were, without exception, not satisfied with their agency placements. This finding should not be surprising; students understand how important agency assignments are to their professional development. To not have a meaningful experience is to be cheated out of a necessary ingredient in one's education. The necessity for continued monitoring of agencies and agency field instructors is essential. Student evaluations of their agency experience at the end of each semester are needed, in addition to the continued interaction between student and teaching assistant and director throughout the semester.

The findings also suggest that students in their first placements believe that while their assignments are important to their own growth, those assignments fall short of being important to clients. For the first placement, and to a lesser extent for the second agency placement, students need to have more challenging and significant learning opportunities, that is, assignments that are important to clients, agencies, and students. The ramifications of this suggestion cannot be detailed here. Suffice it is to say that student readiness is one critical dimension which is dependent on prior academic preparation and on such factors as age, maturity, and life experiences. Agency readiness for the beginning undergraduate professional-in-process includes willingness to provide a carefully sequenced plan of learning opportunities consistent with student readiness and willingness to be challenged toward personal and professional growth. Agency readiness is not always easily discernable and must be constantly monitored.

The third objective was to determine the extent of integration between practica and other required social work courses. One question, global in nature, addressed this issue. The findings, descriptive of one program, must be viewed with caution. Further instrument development and larger samples are needed. While almost half of the respondents (46%) thought integration was successfully achieved between practicum and other social work courses, another 35% thought that only some effort was made, and still others believed that integration had not occurred successfully. Only 11 students indicated that for both practica no consistent effort was made or that class and field were contradictory. Continued effort must be directed to the process of integrating practica with other social work courses.

The fourth objective assessed the social work program's contribution to preparing students for social work practice. The findings support the commonly held belief that field practica and social work practice courses are most directly relevant to preparation for social work practice positions. The course, Human Behavior and the Social Environment, provides a theoretical basis for practice and hence is considered especially relevant for practice. Courses ranked at the bottom should be reexamined to determine if they can be made more relevant for students who will become direct service practitioners.

Field practica experience is a significant portion of the baccalaureate curriculum in social work education about which subjects in this study have a variety of perceptions. It is also apparent from the findings of this study, however, that there is little relationship between field practica satisfaction, as defined, and retention in social work. The data presented in this study is consistent with additional data obtained from these study subjects and reported previously in terms of other educational characteristics within social work undergraduate education.[10]

The most obvious implication of these findings, in terms of retention in social work, concerns the reality of the marketplace to which BSW graduates are exposed immediately upon graduation. If there are no jobs available, a graduate cannot remain in social work and be employed, no matter how satisfied a graduate is with his/her field practica experience.

The significant association between significance of agency assignments and practica satisfaction for each field practicum placement deserves further exploration in terms of differences between agencies and nature of duties. Additional questions concerning the question of retention, particularly among current students who plan to leave social work upon graduation, remain to be explored and are a serious issue for social work undergraduate educators.

It is clear that the question of retention in the field of social work is an important issue at present and in the near future. More research on this topic is needed in order to have an empirical base for making modifications in social work curricula to maximize the retention of social workers in the field.

NOTES

[1]Jack Rothman and Wyatt C. Jones, A New Look at Field Instruction (New York: Association Press, 1971.)

[2]College of Social Professions, University of Kentucky, "Objectives of the College of Social Professions and Graduate and Undergraduate Programs." Self-Study Report, Volume 1," Lexington, Kentucky, February, 1980, p. 22. (Mimeographed.)

[3]Allen Rubin, comp., Statistics on Social Work Education in the United States: 1980 (New York: Council on Social Work Education, 1981.)

[4]A New Look at Field Instruction, p. 149.

[5]Ibid.

[6]Ibid.

[7]Ibid.

[8]Ibid., p. 150.

[9]Dorothy A. Miller, "An Educational Model for the Integration of Classroom and Field Learning: The Teaching-Learning-Center Model for the Educational Practicum of the Social Work Programs at the University of Kentucky College of Social Professions," Lexington, August, 1975. (Mimeographed.)

[10]Paul R. Raffoul and James G. McCullagh, "The Retention of BSW Social Workers: Planned vs. Actual Career Choices" (Paper presented at the Annual Program Meeting of the Council on Social Work Education, New York, 1982.)